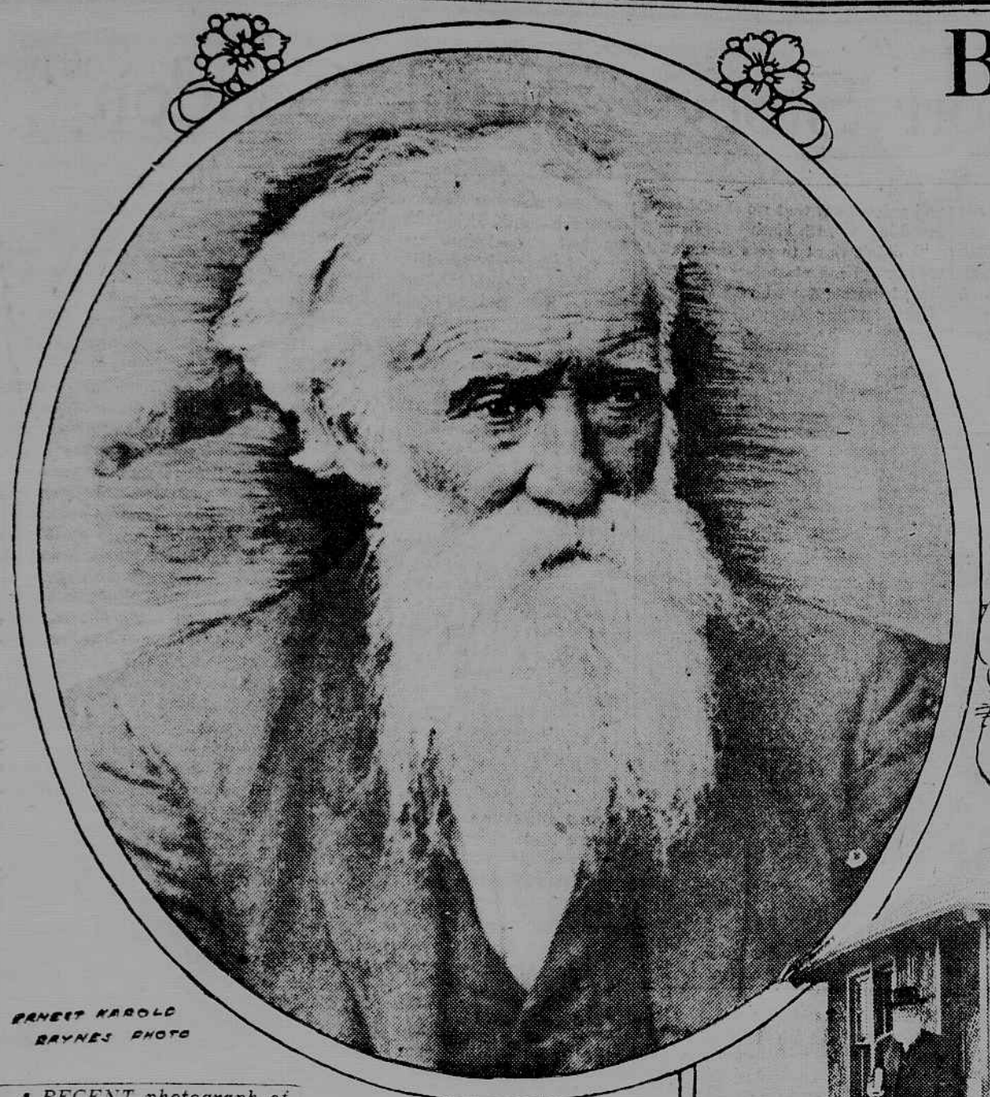
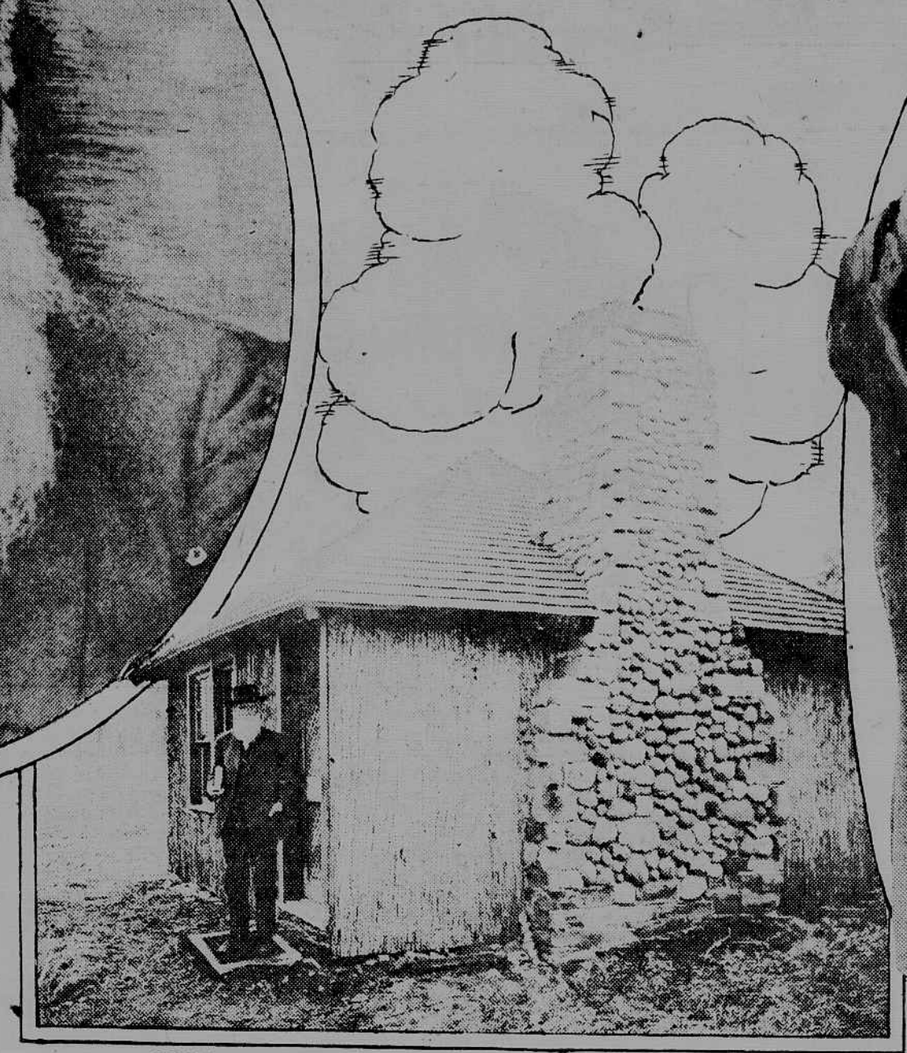
Boyhood of the Late John Burroughs As Described by Naturalist Himself



ERNEST HAROLD BAYNES PHOTO

A RECENT photograph of John Burroughs



PRESS ILL. PHOTO

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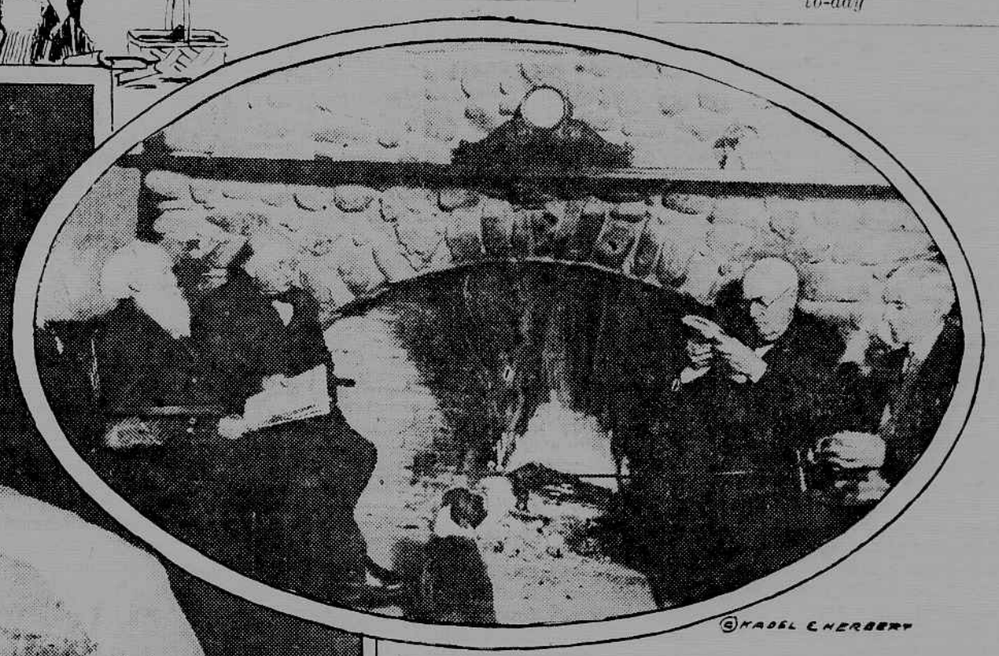
MR. BURROUGHS in his study at West Park, N. Y.

MR. BURROUGHS at Columbia University

MR. BURROUGHS at Yama Farms Inn, Esopus, N. Y., one year ago to-day



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JOHN BURROUGHS, Frank Seaman, Thomas A. Edison and Henry Ford

PIETRO'S statue of Mr. Burroughs, showing the naturalist in characteristic pose

W. C. ECKMAN PHOTO

A SHORT time previous to his death, last Tuesday, John Burroughs wrote an autobiographical article dealing with his boyhood.

Mr. Burroughs, who would have been eighty-four years old to-day, based the article on the influence his parents exerted on his work.

In this article the naturalist gave delightfully intimate details of his boyhood life. He told of his red-haired father, who prayed in a pigpen and never fully understood his book-loving son. Affectionately he dwelt on the influence of his mother, a hard-working woman, whose chief idea among all her tasks was to give her favorite son all that life held.

The Tribune prints Mr. Burroughs's article herewith, and admirers of the naturalist will find much in it that is characteristic and not a little that is new.

By John Burroughs

MY FATHER, Chauncey Burroughs, was born December 29, 1803. He received a fair schooling for those times—the three Rs—and taught school one or two winters. His reading was the Bible and hymn book, his weekly secular paper and a monthly religious paper.

He used to say that as a boy he was a very mean one—saucy, quarrelsome and wicked, liked horse-racing and card-playing, both alike disreputable in those times.

In early manhood he "experienced religion" and joined the old-school Baptist Church, of which his parents were members, and then all his bad habits seem to have been discarded. He stopped swearing and Sabbath breaking and other forms of wickedness and became an exemplary member of the community.

He was a man of unimpeachable veracity; bigoted and intolerant in his religious and political views, but a good neighbor, a kind father, a worthy citizen, a fond husband and a consistent member of his church.

He improved his farm, paid his debts and kept his faith. He had no sentiment about things and was quite unconscious of the beauties of nature over which we make so much ado. "The primrose by the river's brim" would not have been seen by him at all.

Signs of the Times

I have said that my father had strong religious feeling. He took The Signs of the Times for over forty years, reading all those experiences with the deepest emotion.

I remember when a mere lad hearing him pray in the hogpen. It was a time of unusual religious excitement with him, no doubt; I heard, and ran away, knowing it was not for me to hear.

Father had red hair and a ruddy, freckled face. He was tender-hearted and tearful, but with blustering ways and a harsh, strident voice. Easily moved to emotion, he was as transparent as a child, with a child's lack of self-consciousness. Unsophisticated, he had no art to conceal anything, no guide, and, as mother used to say, no manners.

"All I ever had," father would rejoin, "for I've never used any of them."

I doubt if he ever said "Thank you" in his life; I certainly never heard him. He had nothing to conceal and could not understand that others might have.

I have heard him ask people what certain things cost, men their politics, women their ages, with the utmost ingenuousness.

One day when he and I were in Poughkeepsie we met a strange lad on the street with very red hair, and father said to him: "I can remember when my hair was as red as yours." The boy stared at him and passed on.

Although father lacked delicacy, he did not lack candor or directness. He would tell a joke on himself with the same glee that he would on any one else . . . I have heard him tell how, in 1844, at the time of the "anti-renters," when he saw the posse coming, he ran over the hill to Uncle Daniel's and crawled under the bed, but left his feet sticking out, and there they found him. He had not offended, or dressed as an Indian, but had sympathized with the offenders.

He made a great deal of noise about the farm, sending his voice over the hills (we could hear him calling us to dinner when we were working on the "Rundle Place," half a mile away), shouting at the cows, the pigs, the sheep or calling the dog, with needless expenditure of vocal power at all times and seasons.

The neighbors knew when father was at home; so did the cattle in the remotest field. His bark was always to be dreaded more than his bite. His threats of punishment were loud and severe, but the punishment rarely came. Never but once did he take a gad to me, and then the sound was more than the substance.

I deserved more than I got; I had let a cow run through the tall grass in the meadow when I might easily have "headed her off," as I was told to do. Father used to say "No" to our requests for favors (such as a day off to go fishing or hunting) with strong emphasis, and then yield to our persistent coaxing.

One day I was going to town and asked him for money to buy an algebra. "What is an algebra?" He had never heard of an algebra, and couldn't see why I needed one; he refused the money, though I coaxed and mother pleaded with him.

Getting His Algebra

I had left the house and had got as far as the big hill up there by the pennyroyal rock, where he hallooed to me that I might get the algebra—mother had evidently been instrumental in bringing him to terms.

But my blood was up by this time, and as I trudged along to the village I determined to wait until I could earn the money myself for the algebra, and some other books I coveted. I boiled sap and made maple sugar, and the books were all the sweeter by reason of the maple sugar money.

When I wanted help, as I did two or three times later, on a pinch, father refused me, and as it turned out, I was the only one of his children that could or would help him when the pinch came—a curious retribution, but one that gave me pleasure and him no pain. I was better unhelped, as it proved, and better for all I could help him. But he was a loving father all the same. He couldn't understand my needs, but love outweighs understanding.

He did not like my tendency to books; he was afraid, as I learned later, that I would become a minister—his pet aversion. He never had much faith in me—less than in any of his children; he doubted if I would ever amount to anything.

He saw that I was an odd one, and had tendencies and tastes that he did not sympathize with. He never alluded to my literary work; apparently left it out of his estimate of me. My aims and aspirations were a sealed book to him, as his peculiar religious experiences were to me, yet I reckon it was the same leaven working in us both.

Preferred Home Reading

I remember, on my return from Dr. Holmes's seventieth birthday breakfast, in 1879, a remark of father's. He had overheard me telling sister Abigail about the breakfast, and he declared: "I had rather go to hear old Elder Jim Mead preach two hours, if he was living, than attend all the fancy parties in the world." He said he had heard him preach when he did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body. The elder undoubtedly had a strong natural eloquence.

Although father never spoke to me of my writings, Abigail once told me that when she showed him a magazine with some article of mine in, and accompanied by a photograph of me, he looked at it a long time; he said nothing, but his eyes filled with tears.

He went to school to the father of Jay Gould, John Gould—the first child born in the town of Roxbury (about 1780 or 1790).

He married Amy Kelly, my mother, in 1827. He was six years her senior. She lived over in Red Kill, where he had taught school, and was one of his pupils. I have often heard him say: "I rode your Uncle Martin's old sorrel mare over to her folks' when I went courting her." When he would be affectionate toward her before others mother would say: "Now, Chauncey, don't be foolish."

John's Mother

Father bought the farm of 'Riah Bartram's mother, and moved on it in 1827. In a house that stood where the old home does now, I was born, April 3, 1837. It was a frame house, with three or four rooms below and one room "done off" above, and a big chamber. I was the fifth son and the seventh child of my parents.

Mother was in her twenty-ninth year when I was born. She had already borne four boys and two girls. Her health was good, and her life, like that of all farmers' wives in that section, was a laborious one.

I can see her going about her work—milking, butter making, washing, cooking, berry picking, sugar making, sewing, knitting, mending and the thousand duties that fell to her lot and filled her days. Both she and father were up at daylight in the summer and before daylight in winter. Sometimes she had help in the kitchen, but oftener she did not.

The work that housewives did in those days seems incredible. They made their own soap, sugar, cheese, dipped or molded their candles, spun the flax and wool and wove it into cloth, made carpets, knit the socks and mittens and "comforts" for the family, dried apples, pumpkins and berries, and made the preserves and pickles for home use.

Mother went about all these duties with cheerfulness and alacrity. She more than kept up her end of the farm work. She was more strenuous than father. How many hours she sat up mending and patching our clothes while we were sleeping! Rainy days meant no let-up in her work, as they did in father's.

Home-Made Clothes

The first suit of clothes I remember having she cut and made. Then the quilts and coverlids she pieced and quilted! We used, too, in my boyhood, to make over two tons of butter annually, the care of which devolved mainly upon her, from the skimming of the pans to the packing of the butter in the tubs and firkins, though the churning was commonly done by a sheep or a dog. We made our own cheese, also. As a boy I used to help do the wheying, and I took toll out of the sweet curd. One morning I ate so much of the curd that I was completely cloyed and could eat none after that.

I can remember mother's loom pounding away hour after hour in the chamber of an outbuilding where she was weaving a carpet or cloth. I used to help do some of the quilling—running the yarn or linen thread upon spools to be used in the shuttles.

The distaff, the quill-wheel, the spinning-wheel, the reel were very familiar to me as a boy; so was the crackle, the swingle, the hatchel, for father grew flax, which mother spun into thread and wove into cloth for our shirts and summer trousers, and for towels and sheets. Wearing those shirts, when new, made a boy's skin pretty red.

A Provident Housewife

I dare say they were quite equal to a hair shirt to do penance in, and wiping on a new home-made linen towel suggested wiping on a briar bush. Dear me! how long it has been since I have seen any tow, or heard a loom or a spinning-wheel, or seen a boy breaking in his new flax-made shirt! No one sees these things any more.

Mother had but little schooling; she learned to read, but not to write or cipher; hence books and such interests took none of her time. She was one of those uneducated countrywomen of strong natural traits and wholesome instincts, devoted to her children; she bore ten and nursed them all—a heroic worker, a helpful neighbor and a provident housewife, with the virtues that belonged to so many farmers' wives in those days, and which we are all glad to be able to enumerate in our mothers.

She had not a large frame, but was stout; had brown hair and blue eyes, a fine strong brow, and a straight nose with a strong bridge to it. She was a woman of great emotional capacity, who felt more than she thought. She scolded a good deal, but was not especially quick-tempered. She was an old-school Baptist, as was father.

What He Owes His Mother

She was not of a vivacious or sunny disposition—always a little in shadow, as it seems to me now, given to brooding and to dwelling upon the more serious aspects of life. How little she knew of all that has been done and thought in the world! And yet the burden of it all was, in a way, laid upon her.

The seriousness of Revolutionary times, out of which came her father and mother, was no doubt reflected in her own serious disposition. As I have said, her happiness was always shaded, never in a strong light; and the sadness which motherhood and the care of a large family begot was upon her.

I see myself in her perpetually. A longing which nothing can satisfy I share with her. Whatever is most valuable in my books comes from her—the background of feeling, of pity, of love comes from her.

She was of a very different temperament from father—much more self-conscious, of a more brooding, inarticulate nature. She was richly endowed with all the womanly instincts and affections.

She had a decided preference for Abigail and me among her children; wanted me to go to school, and was always interceding with father to get me books. She never read one of my books. She died in 1880, at the age of seventy-three. I had published four of my books then.

She had a stroke of apoplexy in the fall of 1879, but lived till December of the following year, dying on father's seventy-seventh birthday. (He lived four years more.) We could understand but little of what she said after she was taken ill. She used to repeat a line from an old hymn—"Only a veil between."

Framed His Verses

She thought a good deal of some verses I wrote—"My Brother's Farm"—and had them framed.

I owe to mother my temperament, my love of nature, my brooding, introspective habit of mind—all these things which in a literary man help to give atmosphere to his work. In her line were dreamers and fishermen and hunters.

One of her uncles lived alone in a little house in the woods. His hut was doubtless the original slabsides. Grandfather Kelly was a lover of solitude, as all dreamers are, and mother's happiest days, I think, were those spent in the fields after berries. The Celtic element, which I get mostly from her side, has no doubt played an important part in my life. My idealism, my romantic tendencies, are largely her gift.

On my father's side I find no fishermen or hermits or dreamers. I find a marked religious strain, more active and outspoken than on mother's. The religion of the Kellys was for the most part of the silent, meditative kind, but there are preachers and teachers and scholars on father's side—one of them, Stephen Burroughs (b. 1765), a renegade preacher.

Doubtless most of my own intellectual impetus comes from this side of the family. There are also cousins and second cousins on this side who became preachers, and some who became physicians, but I recall none on the Kelly side.

In size and physical make-up I am much like my father. I have my father's foot, and I detect many of his ways in my own. My loud and harmless barking when I am angered I get from him. The Kellys are more apt to bite. I see myself, too, in my brothers, in their looks, and especially in their weaknesses. Take from me my special intellectual equipment and I am in all else one of them.